

VIRTUE ETHICS AND PROTESTANT DISCONTENT: A BRIEF OUTLINE

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I. INTRODUCTION

The history of modern ethical discourse is one that—until recently—revolved around two schools of thought. The first, dependent upon the work of Immanuel Kant, is often called “deontological” signifying its dependence on notions of duty and obligation. The second is best described as consequentialist or utilitarian. In the case of the former, moral decisions are made with a view towards the obligations of the agent while in the case of the latter, moral decisions are made with a view towards the best possible outcome. Thus, the difference between the two positions is largely the difference between defining what is “good” by what is morally “right” (deontology) and defining “right” by what accomplishes the most “good” (consequentialism). In both cases, the presumption is that modern ethics is largely about making choices.

Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, this presumption was called into question as a third alternative emerged: virtue ethics. Virtue, in contrast to both deontology and consequentialism, emphasizes the character of the ethical agent. Ethics, according to this line of thinking, is not only about right actions; it is also, indeed primarily, about the formation of righteous actors.

Virtue itself is not a new concept, playing a central role in classical notions of ethics. And in some sense, the concept of virtue never disappeared. Clearly, deontologist and consequentialist ethicists understood that certain qualities of character were not incidental to the moral decisions an agent made. Even so, little emphasis was placed on character formation and virtue acquisition as the subject matter of ethics itself. As such, its re-emergence as a third ethical theory in the twentieth century is a significant chapter in the history of modern philosophical, theological, and ethical discourse.

In Christian theology, virtue has always retained a place of importance in theologies influenced by Aristotelian and neo-Platonic thought. Thomism is perhaps the most obvious example of a living tradition that has nurtured and developed thick moral accounts of virtue formation. But

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Protestants need not look so far afield for an example of the continued influence of virtue in Christian moral discourse. The Anglo-Catholic intellectual and Neo-Platonist C. S. Lewis is an important example of how virtue continued to inform Christian moral discourse into the twentieth century.

Lewis, as popular as he is in Anglo-American Christian circles, is perhaps an outlier in the history of Protestantism. For several theologians, influenced by Augustine and Luther especially, virtue is an ever-present danger to the gospel of grace. It is works-based salvation; it is Pelagianism; it is humanity's attempt to usurp Christ's crown and to sit ourselves on the judgment seat. And so, the re-emergence of virtue in Protestant moral discourse in the second half of the twentieth century has opened new avenues of exploration, but it has also re-entrenched old theological foes into familiar battle lines.

It is the purpose of this essay to familiarize pastor theologians with both the historical development of virtue ethics in the last half century and the main Protestant concerns that limit the influence of virtue in Protestant ethics. Pastors and congregations who are interested in forming disciples characterized by Christian virtues will have to think about moral formation as it relates to and flows from gospel proclamation. At its heart, most Protestant objections to virtue intend to uphold the Protestant hallmarks of grace alone, faith alone, and Scripture alone. Historically, Protestantism has managed to accomplish this balancing act through catechesis. For this reason, I will end with a brief consideration of how the catechetical teachings on the Decalogue provide the necessary resources for developing Christian virtue.

II. RETRIEVING VIRTUE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

By now, the salient features of virtue ethics are common to almost all philosophical dictionaries and encyclopedias.² We need not provide a detailed overview. Nevertheless, some rough-and-ready definitions will provide useful for our purposes. At least three terms are essential for understanding virtue ethics: virtue, happiness, and prudence. In short, a virtue (*arete*) is a disposition that is acquired through habituation. Its acquisition is ultimately for the purpose of achieving happiness, or human flourishing (*eudaimonia*: lit. "a good spirit"). The process for acquiring and practicing virtue in pursuit of a life of flourishing requires practical wisdom, or prudence (*phronesis*). Prudence is the intellectual virtue that helps a moral agent to determine what a virtuous action is in a particular instance. Prudence is gained over time through experience. Thus, the longer one pursues virtue, the more skilled one becomes in recognizing and practicing virtue, ultimately producing a life of human flourishing.

² I prefer the entry to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* by Rosalind Hursthouse and Glen Pettigrove: see, "Virtue Ethics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/ethics-virtue/>> [Last accessed April 17, 2021].

An example from Aristotle might prove useful at this point to solidify the concepts in our mind. A person becomes a house builder by building houses. The act produces the person; yet, building houses alone does not necessarily make one a good house builder. A good builder develops over time by gaining experience in building and learning how to apply that experience in the future. Prudence, or practical wisdom, is the sort of wisdom gained through repetition over time that allows a person to determine when building a particular house might require a different floor plan, or structure, or reinforcement in certain areas of the building, etc. Prudence is how virtuous action achieves its final end: a good house for the house builder, or a good life for the human.

To say that virtue was “retrieved” in the twentieth century is a bit dishonest. In some regard, virtue never disappeared. Writing in 2015, Jennifer Herdt noted at least three robust streams of Christian virtue ethics in the contemporary Anglo-American theological landscape.³ The first, she dubs Natural Law virtue ethics. The Natural Law tradition is largely dependent upon the Roman Catholic moral tradition. It is deeply committed to a Thomist moral theology that integrates virtue ethics with the natural law tradition, employing distinctions between acquired and infused virtues and nature and grace. This type of Christian virtue has always been present in Roman Catholic moral theology, occasionally popping up in Protestant theological discourse. One prominent example of this is C. S. Lewis’s treatment of the cardinal and theological virtues in *Mere Christianity*.⁴

The twentieth century saw renewed interest in virtue from at least two other sectors. A second type of Christian virtue ethics is one Herdt calls “Particularist.” Particularist theological virtue ethics describes the stream of ethics that comes from Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas and is largely Protestant in expression. Influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein, on the one hand, and Karl Barth, on the other, particularists hold that “Christian virtues are intelligible only within a shared tradition and way of life.”⁵ Sharing Barth’s suspicion of natural theology, particularists are critical of natural law ethics, worrying that accounts of universal human nature and potential fail to take seriously the effects that sin plays on the fallen created order. Particularists focus, instead, on “the gradual, grace-enabled formation of Christian virtues and character through communal practices and narratives, notably through the liturgical and paraliturgical practices of the Church.”⁶

A third important stream of Christian virtue ethics is one that Herdt calls “Analytic” theological virtue ethics. The work being done in this stream belongs largely to Christian philosophers who are associated with the

³ Jennifer A. Herdt, “Varieties of Contemporary Christian Virtue Ethics” in *The Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, ed. Lorraine Besser-Jones and Michael Slote (New York: Routledge, 2015): 223-236.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

⁵ Herdt, “Varieties”, 227.

⁶ Herdt, “Varieties”, 228.

Society of Christian Philosophers (SCP), many of whom work in university philosophy departments. These scholars take Elizabeth Anscombe's work as a challenge to develop coherent moral philosophies that accord with classical doctrines of the Christian faith without necessarily presupposing them. A notable example is Linda Zagzebski.⁷

For our purposes, we will focus on the second stream of thought. Although Protestant historians are increasingly turning to the scholastic era as a place to retrieve fertile discussions of natural law, the more robust Protestant tradition of constructive virtue ethics remains—for the time being, at least—the particularist stream.⁸ Within this stream, Alasdair MacIntyre's influence is unrivaled.

A. ALASDAIR MACINTYRE'S *AFTER VIRTUE*

To call MacIntyre a Thomist is to look for a fight with Thomists. Although his work draws heavily on Thomas, it is a bit of an outlier within Thomism. Jean Porter prefers to call him a “neo-Aristotelian” and John Haldane expresses concern with his historicism.⁹ It is reasonable to suspect that his Thomism retains a twinge of Hegelianism from his Marxist days. In Herdt's typology he best fits the particularist type instead of the natural law type of classical Thomism. This means that MacIntyre's work tends to reflect concerns that are best described as Protestant and modern.

This is, perhaps, because central to MacIntyre's retrieval of virtue is a narrative of moral decline that articulates the loss of coherent moral language concomitant with the emergence of Protestantism and modernity. For some Protestants, MacIntyre's decline narrative serves as a clarion call to retrieve virtue. For others, it perpetuates a one-sided and historically irresponsible caricature of Protestant theology. In both cases, MacIntyre is a figure whose work must be reckoned with. For the sake of brevity, I will focus here exclusively on the argument that MacIntyre makes in *After Virtue*.

For MacIntyre, the history of morality in Western thought originates with Aristotle, whose *Nicomachean Ethics* characterized morality as an inherently teleological endeavor. MacIntyre writes:

Within that teleological scheme there is a fundamental contrast between man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature. Ethics is the science which is to enable men to understand how they make the transition from the former state to the latter. Ethics therefore in this view presupposes some account of potentiality and act, some account

⁷ Herdt, “Varieties”, 229–230.

⁸ A handy summary of these trends is available in Pieter Vos, *Longing for the Good Life: Virtue Ethics After Protestantism* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2020), chapter 4 especially.

⁹ Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 82; John Haldane, *Faithful Reason: Essays Catholic and Philosophical* (London: Routledge, 2004), chapter 2.

of the essence of man as a rational animal and above all some account of the human *telos*.¹⁰

This threefold scheme (human nature, human destiny, and human transformation) flourishes in the theisms of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, giving teleology a divine imprimatur, as it were, with sin accounting for the gap between what is and what could be, and human destiny now becoming something otherworldly.

At the outset of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, all of this was simply true. The Reformation, however, magnified the effects of sin. As a result, the ability of human reason to accomplish the desired transformation is undermined. Ultimately, teleology is relegated to questions of “values” while reason becomes more narrowly scientific.

The thrust of MacIntyre’s account to this point is that Western moral discourse has abandoned teleology. The solution is a return to the language of virtue. The second half of *After Virtue* puts forward the argument that the retrieval of virtue—Aristotelian virtue, in particular—is the solution to the problem of modern moral discourse. In so doing, MacIntyre emphasizes key themes that will become common to contemporary virtue ethics: practice, narrative, and tradition.

MacIntyre argues that every account of virtue must attend to “three stages in the logical development of the concept . . . The first stage requires a background account of what I shall call a *practice*, the second an account of what I have already characterized as the *narrative* order of a single human life and the third an account . . . of what constitutes a moral *tradition*.”¹¹ Virtue becomes a polyvalent concept, meaning different but related things simultaneously.

First, MacIntyre defines a practice in a high-specialized manner. A practice is,

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of that ends and goods involved are systematically extended.¹²

Practices are not merely activities; they are activities that pursue their end within a communally established set of standards. Here, MacIntyre distinguishes between technical skills and the end towards which those skills are used. In the context of practices, MacIntyre defines virtue itself

¹⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1981), 54.

¹¹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 186–187. Emphasis mine.

¹² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187.

for the first time. Virtues are the dispositions that enable us to realize the internal goods towards which a practice aims.¹³

MacIntyre uses the example of a child learning to play chess. Should a child be taught to play chess by offering him candy every time he wins, it would not surprise us if the child resorted to cheating to obtain the candy (an external good); however, should the child desire to become a chess player, then winning the candy will become less important than becoming good at chess (an internal good). Practices like chess are sustained by institutions that support them by providing external goods (world-rank, etc.); a good practitioner must develop virtue to maintain their primary focus on the internal good over the external.

This brings us to the second stage of development: the narrative unity of human life. What ultimately makes someone virtuous is the continuity of character over the course of a lifetime. Virtues, then, are not just dispositions that allow practitioners to realize the internal goods of their practice; they are dispositions that sustain practices over the course of a lifetime in the face of the temptation to settle for external goods.¹⁴

Finally, the third stage of virtue's conceptual development becomes apparent. For someone to be virtuous over the course of a lifetime of practice, a community of virtuous practitioners is necessary. MacIntyre calls this a tradition. In the final analysis, virtue is at once the dispositions that make it possible to achieve the goods internal to a practice, the dispositions that make it possible for a practitioner to stay the course over her lifetime, and finally, the relational dispositions that sustain a community of practitioners from generation to generation.

At the end of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre nods in the direction of Christianity, suggesting that St. Benedict might be an example of someone who established a community of moral formation that is capable of developing practitioners whose lives demonstrate a narrative unity and sustain a living tradition. This so-called "Benedict Option" has caused much consternation in contemporary American Christian discourse, being accused of sectarian withdrawal by culture warriors of all stripes—a sort of sore-loser conservatism in the eyes of liberals and a waving of the white flag by conservatives.¹⁵ Either way, this segues nicely into the question of how MacIntyre's work has influenced the Christian retrieval of virtue ethics.

B. PARTICULARIST CHRISTIAN VIRTUE

The Christian ethicist whose name is most commonly referenced with virtue ethics is Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas's work on the topic preceded MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, depending instead on work of Protestant ethicists H. Richard Niebuhr and James Gustafson. Early on, his focus was on the retrieval of the language of character as a means to overcome situationism in Protestant ethics. This led him to develop notions of virtue, community,

¹³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 191.

¹⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 219.

¹⁵ Of course, I am alluding to Rod Dreher's *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017).

and narrative. With the publication of *After Virtue*, Hauerwas's work begins to merge more closely with MacIntyre's. It is beyond the scope of this paper to dissect what belongs to MacIntyre and what to Hauerwas. What is clear is that by 1983—two years following the publication of *After Virtue*—Hauerwas spoke of Christian ethics in relation to narrative, casuistry, and virtue in a manner that reflected MacIntyre's account of virtue.

In *The Peaceable Kingdom*, Hauerwas argues that the Christian life attends to the truthfulness of the Christian narrative. Only when we know the story do we know where we are going and what virtues will be required to sustain us on the journey. Our perception of the story is challenged and renewed by the practice of casuistry, whereby Christians test our theological convictions against the stories of Jesus Christ and the saints to determine the extent to which they bear witness to God.¹⁶

We see something of MacIntyre's account of virtue here. First, virtues are the practices and habits that sustain the Christian life. Second, these virtues are determined as they reveal themselves in the narrative unity of the life of Christ and in the lives of the saints who have set out to follow Christ. Finally, the communal practice of casuistry makes it possible to sustain a living tradition of Christian virtue over the long haul.

Much more can be said about Hauerwas's theological ethics and his understanding of virtue. For our purposes, it is sufficient to say that Hauerwas's retrieval of virtue centralizes something called "the Christian narrative", which he attends to as the history of God's relationship with Israel, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and God's continued relationship with the church. This story constitutes a tradition of practitioners of the Christian life, and this tradition, in turn, forms a community of people who seek to live out the story through practices and habits that demonstrate the truthfulness of the story itself.¹⁷

Hauerwas was not alone among Protestants thinking about virtue. Early on, he was joined by Lutheran Gilbert Meilaender and Reformed theologian Richard Mouw.¹⁸ Each of these theologians tended to prioritize confessional commitments while trying to move their respective traditions to consider virtue ethics. A survey of recent monographs on virtue suggests they succeeded. Even so, Meilaender and Mouw both remained circumspect about the extent to which Protestant ethics could ever really become re-centered around the theme of virtue. Attempts to do so continue to bump up against classic Protestant doctrinal commitments.

¹⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), chapter 7.

¹⁷ Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 24–26.

¹⁸ Gilbert Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame: UND Press 1984), and Richard J. Mouw, *The God Who Commands: A Study in Divine Command Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

III. PROTESTANTISM AND VIRTUE

Historically, Protestant theology treats virtue ethics with varying degrees of hostility. Perhaps no one is more hostile than Martin Luther, who wrote, “[Aristotle’s] *Ethics* is the worst of all books. It flatly opposes divine grace and all Christian virtues, and yet it is considered one of his best works. Away with such books! Keep them away from Christians.”¹⁹ Protestant concerns with virtue are best described as Augustinian in origin and Lutheran and Reformed in expression. In this section, I will briefly highlight concerns that are indicative of these various perspectives.

A. AUGUSTINIAN CONCERNS WITH VIRTUE

In *Putting On Virtue*, Jennifer Herdt argues moderns are suspicious of virtue because it threatens autonomy and authenticity. In contrast, the Reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were suspicious because it suggested that human moral agents could accomplish something independent of the grace of God. Both suspicions originate with Augustine’s critique of pagan virtue, namely that they are “splendid vices.” Succinctly put, “Augustine’s accusation is that pagans not only fail to pursue God as their true final end but in fact order all things to self.”²⁰

At the heart of the classical conception of virtue is the idea that one becomes virtuous by performing the actions that virtuous people perform. A person becomes good, or just, by performing good, or just, actions over and over. Eventually, those actions form the agent’s character such that she *actually* becomes good, or just.

It is precisely the performative aspect of virtue that concerns Augustine, according to Herdt. The “semblance of virtue” cannot lead to true virtue because true virtue finds its end in a proper love for God. For anyone who does not love God, performance of any action has the opposite effect because it “simply anchors them more deeply in pride and self-love.”²¹ What makes something virtuous is that it is pursued for its own sake. But anyone who pretends to be something they are not cannot become the thing they desire; least of all if they pursue it without reference to God. They aim towards virtue for the sake of self-love. Herdt summarizes an Augustinian account of virtue as follows:

What emerges as the heart of Christian virtue is a willingness to be dependent on God and to give up all striving for self-sufficiency, since this aspiration is for Augustine the heart of pagan misdirection. Dependency does not imply passivity, however; for Augustine, Christian virtue is active insofar as it is

¹⁹ Martin Luther, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Improvement of the Christian Estate” in *The Annotated Luther: Volume 1, The Roots of Reform*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 449.

²⁰ Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 49.

²¹ Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 45.

fundamentally responsive, responsive to the grace that converts us from love of self to love of God.²²

In other words, Christian virtue centers around faith, i.e. responding to God's grace by acknowledging our utter dependence upon him alone. From the position of faith—that is, trust in God—we can habituate ourselves as we, first, see and know the good as we encounter it in God and, second, draw closer to God through imitation, what Herdt calls “mimesis of Christ.” Herdt explains: “Mimesis unites copy with exemplar or, better, reunites copy with exemplar, restoring us to the God from whom we came.”²³ Even so, Protestantism tends to emphasize Augustinian themes that make virtue hard to accept.

The primary one is God's sovereignty. A corollary to divine sovereignty is human dependence—a dependence that is best understood as responsibility instead of passivity. A second important theme for Augustine is human depravity, or original sin. Humans are created to desire (i.e. love) God. The effect of sin is that our desire for God becomes disordered and redirected towards other things, ultimately ourselves. In Augustinian language, we were created without sin (*posse non peccare*); however, after sin enters the world through Adam's disobedience, humans exist in a state where it is impossible *not* to sin (*non posse non peccare*). Virtue is impossible without God's drastic intervention.

Therefore, the notion of pagan virtue is problematic for Augustine. The idea itself may obscure the fact that even the most virtuous pagan cannot stop sinning and, therefore, must come to terms with their dependence upon the grace of God. These are the main theological concerns that will recur in contemporary Protestant virtue ethics, and they often are named by the heresy that is associated with Augustine's theological nemesis: Pelagianism.

B. LUTHERAN AND REFORMED CONCERNS WITH VIRTUE

The rejection of virtue is prominent in Protestantism from the beginning, especially in Lutheran theology. Luther represents, according to Herdt, a sort of hyper-Augustinian perspective. Herdt writes, “What was lost was any sense that grace can work through ordinary processes of habituation, allowing a gradual transcendence of prideful self-love, a growing recognition of our true final end, a developing sense of the dependency of our virtue and moral agency.”²⁴ This is largely because acquired virtue and justification by grace through faith are diametrically opposed lines of thinking in the Protestant imagination. Steven Paulson puts it succinctly: “Lutheran theology starts where all others end. Virtue is not the goal of life, virtue is our problem.”²⁵ From a Protestant “hyper-Augustinian” perspective, virtue navigates dangerously close to Pelagianism.

²² Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 47.

²³ Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 47.

²⁴ Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 3.

²⁵ Steven D. Paulson, *Lutheran Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2011), 2.

In contemporary Lutheran discourse, the doctrine of justification sometimes presents itself as a certain one-sidedness with regards to the law-gospel distinction. Joel Biermann points out that this actually places the gospel in opposition to the law, often skewing towards antinomianism to avoid legalism.²⁶ Every two or three generations a Zinzendorf or a Kierkegaard or a Bonhoeffer comes along offering a corrective to the persistence of lawlessness. For Kierkegaard, it was an emphasis on “works of love”; for Bonhoeffer, an account of “costly grace.”²⁷ And so, it seems Lutheranism is destined to oscillate perpetually between the twin problems of antinomianism and Pelagianism.

In the last century, this tendency was on display regarding the doctrine of justification specifically. The Finnish school of Luther interpretation, based on the work of Tuomo Mannermaa, argued with some success that Luther’s own understanding of the relationship between justification and sanctification is less rigid than the Lutheran church’s confessional statements.²⁸ Likewise, the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)*—perhaps one of the greatest accomplishments of the ecumenical movement of the twentieth century—was co-published by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church and subsequently adopted by the World Methodist Council, the Anglican Communion, and the World Communion of Reformed Churches, making it a truly ecumenical account of the doctrine of justification.²⁹

Several prominent Lutheran theologians rejected these revisions. Perhaps no one was more vocal about his displeasure with *JDDJ* than the German theologian Eberhard Jüngel, who upon reading the document wrote, “For here decisive insights of the Reformation were either obscured or surrendered.”³⁰ The rapprochement between Lutheran and Catholic doctrines of justification coincided with the Finnish interpretation of Luther to provoke a reactive pendulum swing towards re-entrenchment for more traditional Lutherans. And so, the continued oscillation between protecting justification at the expense of lawlessness and developing a Lutheran moral theology at the expense of Pelagianism continues, relativizing the value of any significant Lutheran account of virtue.

If Lutherans err towards antinomianism historically, it seems that the Reformed tradition has erred in the other direction, often producing the sort of legalism that Lutherans fear. The Reformed tradition cared a great

²⁶ Joel D. Biermann, *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), chapter 2.

²⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress, Press, 2001).

²⁸ For a helpful introduction, see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), chapter 4 especially.

²⁹ *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, English-Language Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

³⁰ Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2001), xxxviii.

deal for questions of sanctification and the Christian life. Over the course of time, this resulted in ever more sophisticated compendiums of the types of sins that Christians ought to avoid. The Anglo-American imagination is rife with caricatures of the strict Puritanism exemplified by Nathaniel Hawthorne's New England or the Scottish Sabbatarianism made famous in *Chariots of Fire*.

Theologically, these concerns are expressed in the works of twentieth century Reformed theologians like Karl Barth and T. F. Torrance especially. Karl Barth considered the Westminster Confession of Faith to be "pietistic and egotistic,"³¹ expressing concern that it denigrated into "casuistic hair-splitting" as it sought to explicate a "moralistic and legalistic" Reformed ethic.³² Likewise, T. F. Torrance has argued that the Church of Scotland's adoption of the Westminster standards meant that "a more legalistic Calvinism was authoritatively grafted on to the more evangelical Calvinism of the older Scottish tradition."³³

If the Lutheran propensity towards antinomianism concerns the doctrine of justification, the Reformed propensity towards legalism concerns the doctrine of election. When true virtue only occurs in the elect, Reformed Christians become obsessed with seeing the fruits of their election demonstrated in their actions. For Barth, the Westminster Confession is a watershed in Reformed Christianity because it is the first confessional document to speak of election predominantly from an anthropocentric point of view. The doctrine of predestination becomes an exercise in determining "who's in and who's out" instead of a deeply theological statement about God's very nature. The remedy for this legalism is to re-emphasize divine sovereignty. To this end, Kirk Nolan argues that if there is to be anything like Reformed virtue, it must be relativized by the larger conceptual theme of "divine command" and it must take a pattern of "repetition and renewal" instead of moral progress.³⁴

C. THE CASE OF KARL BARTH

Barth is an interesting case. His theology is deeply influenced by both Lutheran and Reformed theologies. Nevertheless, some of his deepest theological concerns regarding moral virtue skew Lutheran and are at odds with Reformed theology broadly speaking. Because he is the most dominant theological voice on the landscape of twentieth century Protestant theology, it is worth taking a moment to consider him in more detail.

One Lutheran feature of Barth's theology is Barth's commitment to Luther's famous dictum *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously righteous

³¹ Karl Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, trans. Darrell L. Guder and Judith J. Guder (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 136.

³² Barth, *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 143-144.

³³ T. F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (London: T & T Clark, 1996), 127.

³⁴ Kirk J. Nolan, *Reformed Virtue After Barth: Developing Moral Virtue Ethics in the Reformed Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 8.

and sinner). This is a rearticulating of Augustinian concerns about original sin in some respects. The Christian life is experienced at the intersection of two overlapping realities: we are simultaneously both righteous in God's eyes and sinners in our own right. Virtue ethics, insofar as it proposes a gradual growth in holiness, suggests that Christians become sinners *less and less* and righteous *more and more* over time. As Karl Barth famously put it, we ought to say *simul (totus) justus et simul (totus) peccator*. For there is never a time when the Christian is not totally righteous and totally sinful, the old creation and the new co-existing in the same human being.³⁵

Jeff McSwain has recently pointed out that this *totus-totus* logic extends to Barth's doctrine of sanctification itself.³⁶ For McSwain, holiness in this lifetime remains an alien righteousness. Christians are clothed not only in Christ's righteousness, as Luther would have it, but also in Christ's holiness. Any holiness that properly belongs to the new creature remains "hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3, NRSV) this side of eternity.

The logic of McSwain's interpretation of Barth runs contrary to classical Reformed theology. A more traditionally Reformed account of sanctification is the one recently put forward by Michael Allen. Allen takes seriously the concerns of radical Lutheranism while re-emphasizing the Calvinist notion of double grace to speak of justification and sanctification—Christ's work *for* us and the Holy Spirit's work *in* us.³⁷

Radical Lutheranism risks making sin more determinative than the Holy Spirit in the Christian life by proposing that the inevitability of sin absolves us from trying to sin less and less. On the other hand, legalistic types of Reformed theology likewise give sin too much purchase by obsessively documenting all possible sins to help Christians avoid sinning at all costs. Barth errs toward the Lutheran error to the extent that his theology urges us not to take sin too seriously vis-à-vis God's sovereignty.

A second notable feature of Barth's theology is his rejection of natural theology. For our purposes, this effectively stands as a rejection of pagan virtue and natural law ethics. Thomas Aquinas famously spoke of the possibility of imperfect virtue: virtues that can be acquired by natural means and realized in the lives of those who do not know God. For Barth, the effects of sin are such that we cannot have a knowledge of God that is not revealed by God himself. Any knowledge of God, even imperfect knowledge, that could possibly lead to something like true virtue must be knowledge that comes from God himself and is, therefore, salvific.³⁸

A Barthian rejection of natural theology also prohibits natural law ethics. In classical Reformed theology, the natural law—identical to the Decalogue—is "written on every human heart" and is knowable by

³⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1958), 572.

³⁶ Jeff McSwain, *Simul Sanctification: Barth's Hidden Vision for Human Transformation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018).

³⁷ Michael Allen, *Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 37.

³⁸ Nolan, *Reformed Virtue After Barth*, 6.

“conscience and reason” even after sin distorts human perception. Knowledge of the natural law is insufficient for salvation but necessary for civil order.³⁹ In the Barth/Brunner debate over natural theology, Barth effectively reduced Reformed Orthodoxy to neo-Thomism, characterizing the natural law as something that was Roman Catholic. Barth’s domination of his debate with Brunner has obscured the fact that Reformed theology has always maintained an appropriate sense of natural law.

IV. TOWARDS A PROTESTANT VIRTUE ETHIC

Protestant concerns with virtue ethics are perhaps best expressed in relation to the traditional Protestant hallmarks of *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and *sola Scriptura*. In this section, I will take up each of these concerns briefly.

First, the basically Augustinian theological tradition that moves through Luther and Calvin into contemporary Protestantism is one that calls into question the role that virtue plays in relationship to grace. At its heart, the Augustinian concern with virtue is a concern regarding Pelagianism—the notion that humans can contribute anything of their own nature towards their salvation. The nature/grace distinction that emerges in Thomas Aquinas’s treatment of acquired and infused virtues is an exemplification of this concern. Insofar as Thomas’s account of acquired virtue is dependent upon Aristotle, Protestants have worried that grace is relegated to a sort of supernatural finishing act to natural human moral striving. Ultimately, I think this concern can be alleviated by attention to more contemporary interpretations of Thomas.

We cannot give Thomas’s account of the virtues the full attention it deserves; however, it is necessary to speak momentarily about infused virtue. A curious thing happens to virtue in Thomas’s treatment; namely, it becomes defined not by Aristotle but by Augustine. Although Thomas draws heavily from Aristotle’s idea of habituation, he lets Augustine’s definition of virtue set the terms: “Virtue is a good quality of the mind, by which we live righteously, of which no one can make bad use, which God works in us, without us.”⁴⁰

Specifically, it is the last phrase which is at odds with Aristotelian virtue: “which God works in us, without us.” This is the foundation for the distinction that Thomas makes between acquired virtues and infused virtues. All true virtue has its beginning in God and returns to God as it draws us into God’s eternal presence. Acquired virtues, like prudence and justice, may also be infused by God. In addition, Thomas discusses virtues that can only be infused, like humility and the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. These are all virtues to the extent that they are dispositions that move us closer to God; however, they are also divine gifts, the very means by which we can move at all. Infused virtues are infused

³⁹ Stephen J. Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 2.

⁴⁰ Augustine cited in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 3 vols., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947), I-II, Q. 55, Art. 4.

instantaneously, unlike acquired virtues which obtain over time through habituation. This also means that infused virtues can be lost instantaneously because of mortal sin.

Older interpreters of Thomas, neo-Thomists especially, have emphasized the continued influence of Aristotle by speaking of a “proportional equivalence” between acquired and infused virtues. Acquired virtue, it is said, pertains to humanity’s natural end while infused virtue pertains to its supernatural end. Contemporary interpreters, however, worry that this undermines the uniqueness of Thomas’s contribution.⁴¹ The notion of God-given virtue, especially as instantaneous, is simply unfathomable on Aristotelian terms. This is why I think Robert Miner is correct when he argues that Augustine’s definition of virtue is not merely relevant for infused virtue, but for all virtue in Thomas.⁴² What is particularly Aristotelian about Thomas’s treatment of virtue is the attention he gives to causation in his explication of Augustine’s definition.⁴³ Thomas is methodologically Aristotelian in many respects but he is theologically Augustinian, emphasizing God’s prior action both in the overall structure of the *Summa Theologica* and in his approach to virtue specifically.

A second Protestant concern that relates to *sola gratia* is that virtue undermines the Protestant insistence on *sola fide*, or justification by grace through faith alone. The radical Lutheran insistence on justification is perhaps one-sided, ignoring Luther’s own thinking on sanctification, for example;⁴⁴ but, at its heart it is an appropriate Protestant expression of the significance that the Reformation understanding of justification must hold in Protestant theology itself. To this end, several scholars who have tried to develop Protestant accounts of virtue have often attempted work-arounds that give *sola fide* its proper due.

One such example is the proposal recently made by Elizabeth Agnew Cochran, who has suggested that Protestant virtue ethicists replace Aristotelian virtue with Stoic virtue. According to Cochran, Stoic virtue is appealing because it is “unified, singular, and transformative.”⁴⁵ To be virtuous means: (1) to possess all virtues simultaneously, (2) to flourish independent of external circumstances like fate, and (3) to experience instantaneous transformation.

Even more promising, Cochran argues, is the centrality that assent plays in Roman Stoicism. To possess virtue means to accept one’s place in the world and to assent to the idea that the universe is governed by a rational and basically moral divine principle. For Cochran, this is akin to

⁴¹ Andrew Pinsent, “Aquinas: Infused Virtues” in *The Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, 146–147.

⁴² Robert Miner, “Infused Virtue as Virtue Simply: The Centrality of the Augustinian Definition in *Summa Theologiae* I/2.55–67”, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 71/4 (2018): 411–424.

⁴³ Miner, “Infused virtue as virtue simply”, 415.

⁴⁴ Phil Anderas, *Renovatio: Martin Luther’s Augustinian Theology of Sin, Grace, and Holiness* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019).

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Agnew Cochran, *Protestant Virtue and Stoic Ethics* (London: T & T Clark, 2018), 55.

the Christian concept of faith. Thus, Stoic virtue permits the possibility of simultaneously prioritizing human agency as responding in faith to God's saving action while describing moral progress as instantaneous transformation of the sort that can only be initiated by a divine agent. Cochran's suggestion is creative; however, I worry that it over-identifies Protestantism with Stoicism at points, collapsing the Christian doctrine of God into a vague and determinist divine providence. I think Kavin Rowe is right to argue that Christianity and Stoicism are rival moral traditions that are ultimately incommensurate with each other.⁴⁶

Further, I worry that recasting the theological virtues to make faith the crown of the virtues undermines the witness of scripture. As Herdt notes, faith takes on greater significance in Augustinian accounts of virtue. Even so, Augustine's insistence that "faith works through love" suggests that for Augustine love remains the crown virtue. This also accords with Paul's insistence in 1 Corinthians 13 that "if I have all faith . . . but do not have love, I am nothing" (v. 2, NRSV).⁴⁷ In other words, attempts to accommodate *sola fide* by making faith the crown of the virtues risk undermining an even more basic Reformation commitment: *sola Scriptura*.

Sola Scriptura, or scripture alone, is shorthand for the Protestant insistence that scripture holds pride of place in theological discourse. For Protestants, scripture is the *norma normans*, or the "norming norm." It has final say with regards to doctrinal disagreements. The phrase *sola Scriptura* originates with Luther, who argued that scripture must speak for itself, over and, if necessary, against the church's tradition of interpretation.⁴⁸

The Protestant concern with virtue, as expressed in Luther's disdain for Aristotle's *Ethics*, concerns first and foremost Luther's frustration with a medieval university curriculum that centered Aristotle's works at the expense of scripture itself. Recommending university reform, Luther writes, "What are [universities] but places where loose living is practiced, where little is taught of the Holy Scriptures and Christian faith, and where only the blind, heathen teacher Aristotle rules far more than Christ?"⁴⁹

Several scholars have pointed out that Luther's harsh comments about Aristotle were tempered throughout his career, noting that even he came to accept the usefulness of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁵⁰ Even so, the thrust of Luther's argument persists today. Christian ethics ought to be determined by Christianity's norming norm: scripture alone.

⁴⁶ C. Kavin Rowe, *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

⁴⁷ Augustine, *The Augustine Catechism: Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Charity*, trans. Bruce Harbert (New York: New City Press, 1999), 138.

⁴⁸ Cornelis van der Kooi and Gijsbert van den Brink, *Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma with James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 535.

⁴⁹ Luther, "To the Christian Nobility", 448.

⁵⁰ For a succinct summary of the use of Aristotle's ethics in Protestant Europe, see David S. Sysma, "Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Protestantism", *Academic Letters* (July 2021), Article 1650. <<https://doi.org/10.20935/AL1650>> [Last accessed 25 August 2021].

For this reason, Luther turned to the Decalogue as the seminal text for Christian ethical reflection.⁵¹ In his catechisms, Luther begins with the Decalogue before treating the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and sacraments. This decision would have a widespread impact on Protestant Christianity. Calvin would replicate this structure in his *Institutes*. Later Protestant catechisms (Heidelberg and Westminster especially) would retain the same basic components even as it reordered them to place the Creed before the Decalogue. The overall effect would be to equate Protestant morality with the Decalogue itself.

The most significant hurdle a Reformed virtue ethic will have to overcome is the presumption that virtue ethics is extra-biblical and perhaps even anti-biblical. Any Protestant notion of virtue will have to prove itself first and foremost in relation to scripture. This is a task that is already well under way. A growing number of Biblical scholars are finding that classical notions of virtue are compatible with, if not presupposed by, scripture itself.

In Old Testament scholarship, the strong resemblance between the wisdom literature of the Bible and ancient Greek literature has been noted. In her recent work on the subject, Patricia Vesely has argued that the book of Job, a unique amalgam of narrative and wisdom literature, is an example of how a biblical concept of friendship and the virtues that it entails is congruent with Greek concepts of virtue.⁵² The Old Testament especially, because of its wealth of narrative literature, has been fertile ground for virtue ethics-based interpreters. That is not to say that there are not Old Testament scholars who remain committed to deontological models for understanding divine commandments.⁵³ As significant as narrative is, it is hard to deny the large body of legal literature in the Pentateuch.

Determining the relationship between the genres of narrative and law in the Old Testament is paramount for understanding the moral vision of the Old Testament. Influenced by canonical approaches to interpretation, Bruce Birch effectively argues that the law literature of the Old Testament becomes intelligent against the background of the narrative literature: "Their function is not just in the shaping of community conduct, but in the formation and maintenance of a particular community character."⁵⁴ The laws help the Israelites to locate themselves within the story of God's prior deliverance from Egypt, their future inheritance of the Promised Land, and their vocation to imitate God's holiness in the meantime.

In New Testament scholarship, we might expect to find the most fruitful literature on virtue to emerge from the synoptic gospels. Ethicists like Hauerwas tend to focus on the life of Jesus as the narrative context in

⁵¹ Donald Sinnema, "The Discipline of Ethics in Early Reformed Orthodoxy", *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 11.

⁵² Patricia Vesely, *Friendship and Virtue Ethics in the Book of Job* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁵³ John Barton, "Virtue in the Bible", *Studies in Christian Ethics* 12/1 (1999): 12–22.

⁵⁴ Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 165.

which Christian virtues become intelligible. To the contrary, it is the recent work of Paul scholars that gains the most ground.

Paul has long been the apostle of Protestant theology. In recent years, Pauline scholarship has been ground zero for debates surrounding the Protestant doctrine of justification. For some Protestants, contemporary interpreters who relativize the centrality of justification in Paul's own theology threaten the gospel itself. For others, recent Paul scholarship has given us a more accurate picture of Paul's own thought on matters regarding the moral life. In this picture, the relationship between Paul and virtue comes into focus.

N. T. Wright argues that early Christianity emerged in a thought-world that understood moral formation in basically Aristotelian terms.⁵⁵ For Paul in particular, it is not a question of whether the moral life entails the formation of virtues but a question of which virtues. This question is determined by the goal: "Where Aristotle had *eudaimonia*, Paul has 'the image of God.'"⁵⁶ Wright's reading of Paul centers on 1 Corinthians 13 and Galatians 5.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul speaks of the virtues of faith, hope, and love, positioning love as the crown of the virtues. Later Christian tradition will call these the "theological virtues." For Paul, love is the virtue that remains because love is not only a virtue that sustains the Christian life, it is the goal of life itself: "Love is not a 'duty,'" Wright notes, "It is our destiny."⁵⁷

A similar picture emerges in Galatians 5 where Paul introduces the fruit of the spirit. In this instance, love is the beginning of a list of nine virtues. Love, as the crown of the virtues, is not only the virtue in which all other virtues have their end; it is also the means by which other virtues are possible. The fruit of the spirit develop as we ourselves are transformed by the infused virtue of love.⁵⁸

Central to Wright's argument for a Pauline virtue ethic is the idea that Christians put on the virtues of Christ as they imitate him, conforming more and more to the image of God. Imitation has always been a crucial aspect of Christian accounts of virtue. In some contemporary Reformed theologies influenced by Karl Barth and T. F. Torrance, it has become fashionable to emphasize participation over and against imitation, using participation to describe the Christian moral life as one lived "en christo." That is, that any righteousness that we demonstrate in this life is one that remains alien and has Christ as its proper agent.

The work of Paul scholar Douglas Campbell has been especially influential in this regard. Campbell emphasizes the extent to which Paul's own theology re-positions the new life of a Christian as a life lived "in Christ" as she participates in Christ's death and resurrection through the work of

⁵⁵ N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 33–35.

⁵⁶ Wright, *After You Believe*, 168.

⁵⁷ Wright, *After You Believe*, 188.

⁵⁸ Wright, *After You Believe*, 206.

the Holy Spirit.⁵⁹ A transformative life of participation in Christ is one in which the virtues of patience, perseverance, and hope are developed in and through the Spirit.⁶⁰

In his recent work, Campbell bridges the gap between Barthian and Reformed conceptions of participation in Christ with classical conceptions of imitation. For Campbell, Paul's use of imitation language always presupposes participation in Christ. Campbell writes, "Paul envisages his teaching taking place imitatively through coworkers. Jesus is in Paul, and Paul is in Timothy along with Jesus (the latter indwelling being rather more important). So the Corinthians can experience Jesus through Timothy and should imitate him."⁶¹ When Paul exhorts Christians to imitate him and, therefore, to imitate Jesus, he is presenting churches with living exemplars of the virtues that Christians should embody. Christians imitate Jesus (and other Christians) even as they participate in the work of the Spirit to transform them into Christ's likeness. Thus, in Paul, there is room for both a radically Reformed insistence on God's sole agency regarding our salvation and for a participatory—dare we say cooperative—account of divine and human agency in the Christian life.

V. PROTESTANT VIRTUE: A SKETCH

Luther's commitment to *sola Scriptura* had the effect of centering Protestant ethical discourse on the Decalogue instead of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Over time, this resulted in a Protestant penchant for divine command ethics based upon deontological notions of obligation and duty. The interpretive power of deontological interpretations prevails even today. Scholars who try to make sense of virtue from a Protestant perspective find themselves accommodating virtue to a prevailing ethic of command. Even so, the Decalogue remains the biblical starting point for any future Protestant virtue ethic.

One of the most promising paths forward in Reformed theology, and perhaps Protestant theology more broadly, concerns the traditional Reformed idea of the three uses of the law. In Reformed thought, the law functions in three ways: first, as a condemnation on our sin; second, as a restraint against the worst effects of sin; and third, as instruction in the

⁵⁹ Douglas A. Campbell, *The Quest for Paul's Gospel: A Suggested Strategy* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 38–42.

⁶⁰ Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 66.

⁶¹ Douglas A. Campbell, *The Triumph of God's Love: Pauline Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 232. Campbell is not alone in making the connection between participation language and moral formation or sanctification. Michael Gorman and Grant Mackaskill are two other scholars who have recently done work in this area. Michael J. Gorman, *Participating in Christ: Explorations in Paul's Theology and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019). Mackaskill accounts for Paul's "in Christ" language using tradition Reformed notions of double grace and union with Christ to explain participatory language in Paul. Grant Mackaskill, *Living in Union with Christ: Paul's Gospel and Christian Moral Identity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).

Christian life. Most contemporary retrievals of virtue in Protestant theology skew towards the first two uses, emphasizing either the necessity of the gospel for our salvation (Lutheran) or the importance of the natural law tradition for civic life (Reformed). Against both trajectories, I think that the primary and most fruitful use of the law is the third use as a means to develop a particularist account of Reformed Christian virtue as sanctification. This move allows us to construct an account of moral formation that includes human agents without compromising divine sovereignty in relationship to the doctrine of justification. As Christina Aus der Au puts it, in its third use, the law is directed “to the *justus* and not to the *peccator*.”⁶²

In my own work, I have advocated for the role that Reformed confessions and catechisms should play in the retrieval of virtue.⁶³ I think this direction is preferable for several reasons. First, the Reformed catechisms—Westminster and Heidelberg in particular—nod in the direction of the third use of the law by treating the Decalogue after the Apostles Creed, clearly indicating that obedience to the law is subsequent to and dependent upon justification by faith through grace alone. In Luther’s *Larger Catechism*, this is not the case. There, the Decalogue appears prior to the Creed, effectively reducing the law to its use as a condemnation on our sinfulness.

Second, confessions and catechisms hold a unique authority in the Reformed tradition. Churches and presbyteries subscribe to these documents as trustworthy interpretations of scripture and communal affirmations of the Christian faith. As such, they constitute a Reformed “tradition” in the MacIntyrian sense. Catechisms specifically exist to initiate new members into the tradition of the Reformed Christian life, pointing individual Christians towards their end and describing the practices and virtues necessary to sustain them on the journey.

The Westminster catechisms, for example, begin by teaching the catechumen that their “chief end” is “to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”⁶⁴ Subsequently, they encounter the Decalogue between the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer suggesting that the practices that the Decalogue exhort have the internal goods of glorifying and enjoying God as their end and the example of Jesus’s prayer as a model for ordering those practices towards that end.

Third, the catechisms give us an example of how to employ casuistry as a means to test and strengthen the role that obedience to the Decalogue plays in the Christian life. In both Westminster Catechisms, as well as Heidelberg, each commandment is considered in accordance with what sorts of actions the commandment enjoins and forbids. The Westminster Larger Catechism is especially detailed. For example, the commandment against stealing produces the following results in the Larger Catechism:

62 Christina Aus der Au, “Being Christian in the World: The Tercus Usus Legis as the Starting Point for a Reformed Ethic,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 28/2 (2015): 134.

63 David B. Hunsicker, “The Westminster Standards and the Possibility of a Reformed Virtue Ethic,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 71/2 (2018): 176–194.

64 Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 1. <<https://thewestminsterstandard.org/westminster-shorter-catechism/>> [Last accessed 18 April 2021].

Q. 140. *Which is the eighth commandment?*

A. The eighth commandment is, *Thou shalt not steal.*

Q. 141. *What are the duties required in the eighth commandment?*

A. The duties required in the eighth commandment are, truth, faithfulness, and justice in contracts and commerce between man and man; rendering to every one his due; restitution of goods unlawfully detained from the right owners thereof; giving and lending freely, according to our abilities, and the necessities of others; moderation of our judgments, wills, and affections concerning worldly goods; a provident care and study to get, keep, use, and dispose these things which are necessary and convenient for the sustentation of our nature, and suitable to our condition; a lawful calling, and diligence in it; frugality; avoiding unnecessary lawsuits, and suretiship, or other like engagements; and an endeavor, by all just and lawful means, to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others, as well as our own.

Q. 142. *What are the sins forbidden in the eighth commandment?*

A. The sins forbidden in the eighth commandment, besides the neglect of the duties required, are theft, robbery, man-stealing, and receiving anything that is stolen; fraudulent dealing, false weights and measures, removing landmarks, injustice and unfaithfulness in contracts between man and man, or in matters of trust; oppression, extortion, usury, bribery, vexatious lawsuits, unjust enclosures and depredation; engrossing commodities to enhance the price; unlawful callings, and all other unjust or sinful ways of taking or withholding from our neighbor what belongs to him, or of enriching ourselves; covetousness; inordinate prizing and affecting worldly goods; distrustful and distracting cares and studies in getting, keeping, and using them; envying at the prosperity of others; as likewise idleness, prodigality, wasteful gaming; and all other ways whereby we do unduly prejudice our own outward estate, and defrauding ourselves of the due use and comfort of that estate which God hath given us.⁶⁵

The Christian life is a life that is lived in pursuit of love of God and neighbor. The catechism's lengthy responses historically have had the unfortunate effect of relegating their actual use in the moral formation of Reformed Christians. This is precisely the point at which Barth criticizes the catechisms for devolving into casuistic hair-splitting. Casuistry, however, need not be so legalistic.

⁶⁵ The Westminster Larger Catechism, qq. 140–142. <<https://thewestminsterstandard.org/westminster-larger-catechism/>> [Last accessed 18 April 2021].

What we ought to take from the Westminster Larger Catechism is a picture of how Reformed Christians in the seventeenth century attempted to exercise the intellectual virtue of prudence in their pursuit of the theological virtue of love. Thievery is not merely taking something that does not belong to us. It is falling short of our vocation to “further the wealth and outward estate of others,” not to mention the Aristotelian vices of prodigiousness, stinginess, ambition, deceitfulness, and so on.

We need not receive Westminster’s enjoinders and prohibitions as a law to be obeyed to the letter. Instead, we can find in them an exemplar of how Christians thought about their moral lives and the virtues necessary to sustain them in relation to the world in which they lived—a world increasingly influenced by global commerce and colonialism. In that context, we are not surprised to find that the Westminster Divines found it necessary to speak about slavery, business contracts, litigation, and the exchange of commodities, among other things. Such careful thought ought to inspire us to consider what sort of world confronts the lives of contemporary Christians and what sort of virtues might the Decalogue call us to inhabit.

For pastors, the challenge begins with considering the role that moral formation takes in the life of the congregation. In most congregations it stops at the pulpit, and sometimes even before the pulpit. Joel Biermann jokes that many Lutheran pastors have managed to successfully reduce concrete ethical guidance from the Pauline corpus into the law which convicts us, only to swoop in with the gospel in order to remind the congregation that their inability to heed Paul’s advice has no bearing on their salvation.⁶⁶ What is not funny about this all-too-common practice is the assumption by the pastor that the gospel has nothing to do with the moral life—that any discussion of the moral life from the pulpit risks reducing itself to works-based righteousness.

When moral instruction does occur from the pulpit, it often goes under the guise of “application.” When this happens, pastors tend to assume that the gospel needs help to become relevant in the lives of congregants—help that often comes from the latest *New York Times* bestseller. Thus, moral formation is reduced to fashion magazine-like lists of “tips” or “steps” that the congregant can take or leave in their own moral journey. Even when application happens well, drawing from scripture itself or the examples of revered believers, the moral formation still falls short if it remains in the pulpit.

Moral formation must move beyond the pulpit and into the lives of parishioners. Historically, this occurred through catechetical instruction—training in the faith. In our culture, catechesis has become disjointed from the Christian life. Catechetical questions have become facts to be memorized before confirmation and forgotten soon afterwards. Or even worse, catechesis produces Christians who actually know what they believe and yet fail to understand how their beliefs remain incomplete if they are

⁶⁶ Joel Biermann, *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 1–2.

not accompanied by works of love. The tragic example of an Orthodox Presbyterian who shot up a synagogue in Poway, California, a few years ago comes to mind. In that instance, the perpetrator published a manifesto that demonstrated great understanding regarding the doctrine of justification by grace through faith even as he failed to understand how his actions might be inconsistent with the Reformed faith. I take this to be symptomatic of Protestant Christianity's propensity to fail to catechize the virtue of love alongside of the virtue of faith.

Contemporary Christians need to rethink catechesis from the bottom up, attending to how instruction in the faith is embodied in the lives of the catechumens as it works itself out in love of God and neighbor. As James Smith suggests, if we want to transform people, we have to aim for the heart not the head.⁶⁷ This means attending to the desires that enable or inhibit moral formation in the first place—the loves that short-circuit our ability to ground our faith in a proper love.

In the old catechisms, we find a blueprint for how to press on. In their treatments of the Decalogue, we see attentiveness to the question of what it means to love God and neighbor that works itself out in moral instruction regarding what God has commanded from us, why we often fall short, and in what ways we might turn away from our shortcomings and towards the holiness that the Holy Spirit is already working in us, without us.

⁶⁷ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).